Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 31 Article 17

April 2007

Talking Back: Asking Hard Questions about the Impact of International Service Learning

Robbin D. Crabtree

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation

Crabtree, Robbin D. (2007) "Talking Back: Asking Hard Questions about the Impact of International Service Learning," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 31 , Article 17.
Available at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol31/iss1/17

Asking Hard Questions about the Impact of International Service Learning

What will we feel? Pity? Sympathy? Guilt?

By Robbin D. Crabtree

In his discussion of education for justice (*Conversations*, volume 25, spring), Robert Bellah uses service learning as an example of an educational approach that may inculcate students with a greater sense of and commitment to the common good. Of course, service learning is not a panacea, but as Bellah further argues, "where [it] is integrated into actual course work, where it is done together with others, and above all, where it takes place in a context of on-going reflection about the meaning and value of the work, it can have life-changing consequences."

Writing about globalization and international education in *Conversations* a year earlier (volume 24, spring), Dennis Gordon reminds us that international educational programs, like globalization itself, often manifest a mix of stated policies, random actions, and unintended consequences. Thus, he argues, "Jesuit educators must continually ask the hard questions about how overseas programs affect students, the communities where they learn and serve, and the broader society."

In order to link, continue, and extend conversations begun by Bellah and Gordon, some "hard questions" also need to be asked about international service learning (ISL). In particular, I encourage thoughtful and critical reflection on the nature of our international partnerships, the effects of our presence in developing countries, and the ways these issues affect student learning. While my focus is on service learning in international contexts, many of the issues raised are relevant to domestic programs, as well.

The number and range of international education opportunities has grown in recent years. Much of this growth has been in semester and shorter-length programs, many with service components, while full-year abroad participation has been on the decline for at least fifteen years. Many universities offer three-week or shorter ISL opportunities for students who cannot study abroad but are interested in a global education experience. Given increased interest in and corresponding proliferation of ISL programs, we must ask: What is their impact on the local communities where we work and the larger development process in the countries where we serve? What impact does ISL have on our students?

The Impact of ISL on Communities and Countries

Often when we work in a local community, we see the tangible manifestations of the immediate material and spiritual help we provide. When building houses or bridges, working in clinics or schools, we feel fairly certain that our presence helps people. Those who were homeless are no longer. Those without medical care are treated. Their gratitude marks the profundity of this contribution.

Our work in global settings helps others, as well. For instance, Nicaraguans tell me they were so impressed by our students' willingness to try new things (e.g., construction, language, cultural activities) that they, too, develop new courage. I have seen local women use power tools and men give public speeches in their communities for

Robbin D. Crabtree is professor and chair in the communications department and director of the center for service learning at Fairfield University.

Published by e-Publications@Marquette, 2007



Students performing community service projects at Regis University.

How do we ensure that our work does not reproduce a history of dependency?

the first time. Our ISL programs can help by providing a catalyst for such community gatherings and for collective work. In Kenya, more than a hundred local people came to help renovate a community well even though there were tools for only fifteen or twenty to work. We passed tools around and those without tools sang songs of encouragement. In El Salvador, community members found willing listeners for their stories of personal and national tragedy from among our visiting students; sharing their *testimoniales* was therapeutic. There are countless other stories about how Jesuit colleges and universities help poor and marginalized people in communities around the world through material and technical assistance, simple friendship, and our ability to witness.

Yet, how do we ensure that our work doesn't reproduce a history of dependency between the U.S. and the developing countries where we visit with our students? The help described above, though personally gratifying to most participants, does not necessarily depart from past colonial and neo-colonial ties between "us" and "them". Much of our (i.e., U.S. government, Catholic church, etc.) international presence has been posited, at least in public proclamations and policy documents, to help developing countries, to help the poor. However, many examples to the contrary have been documented.

One of the ways ISL programs can try to avoid the pitfalls of large-scale, externally-driven, top-down development is to collaborate with grassroots organizations who can

determine local needs, design projects, and facilitate local collaboration. This approach to participatory development has proven more sustainable, producing a wide range of positive outcomes beyond project completion, including consciousness-raising, self-reliance, and knowledge sharing. It is a good framework for international service learning.

After all, to what degree do we really understand the relationships among communities, local grassroots organizations, and domestic institutions in the countries where we work? One project in which students recently participated involved collaboration among bi-national and local organizations and my (previous) university. During the group's two-week stay in a Salvadoran community, U.S.A.I.D. officials visited to see what *gringos* were doing in this remote region. Following our visit, U.S.A.I.D. began a housing project in the area. While a dozen or so families benefited, this project was not the result of formal analysis of local needs, nor was it the manifestation of a well-articulated regional development plan. Rather, the new houses served as a form of public relations in a community where it was known U.S. citizens had interest. On the same trip, the mayor of a nearby community who talked to us about the political process of post-war reconstruction was later detained by authorities and subsequently removed from his mayoral duties.

These examples can serve as a warning to ISL programs to be mindful of the dynamics among various factions within the countries where we serve. Clearly, our service often has unanticipated and unintended consequences; even with well-established local guides and organizations as partners, ISL is implicated in a complex web of politics and history. As community members debate the value of our contributions, as interpersonal contacts between locals and visitors can lead to misunderstandings or jealousies, and as the economic impact of our presence is inevitably felt unevenly in the host country, ISL leaders and our partners need to be prepared to analyze and manage emergent conflict related to our presence and our resources.

Even with best practices, in what ways do we risk our service projects and ISL collaborations substituting—rather than supplementing—local, national, and international government and business responsibility and accountability? It is this question that leaves me the most ambivalent as I continue to teach about globalization in my courses, lead trips for a service and cross-cultural education NGO, and work to develop an ISL program at my current university. As many countries and their smallest, most remote villages clamor to get some of the affluence and opportunity promised by globalization optimists, we must take note that funding for and interest in non-commercial economic structures and projects diminishes.

It is our responsibility to respond to a world in need, but our efforts must be considered within a much larger, and for the moment much less promising, global outlook. It is our responsibility, as Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., has characterized it, to educate our students for solidarity with those most marginalized in the new global order. But to what extent are we engaging these hard questions as we design and implement our ISL programs?

The Impact of ISL on Participants

The successful service-learning program addresses both the need to be of service to others and the need to provide a transformational experience for our students. Following service-learning experiences, generally, and ISL experiences more intensely, participants often remark that they have been changed by the experience. But changed from what to what? What do participants think this transformational learning experience is about? Some reflections on transformation and change from a recent focus group of returning ISL participants can be seen on Table One.

These ideas should be seen along a continuum, with the arrow indicating the direction of change an ISL experience can facilitate as part of creating "men and women for others" and a "well-educated solidarity". It is worth considering which of these common outcomes of ISL participation reveals changes that might actually be disempowering, and which might reveal a more mutually empowering transformation for students and community members alike.

We need to ask ourselves: After our relatively brief encounter with the poor, do we feel sympathy for them? Pity for them? Guilt? What kinds of actions do such feelings inspire? Do we respond with charity? Are our interactions patronizing? How many of our "things" do we leave behind and why? Furthermore, as we consider new awareness of our global relationship, is their (or our) despair replaced with gratitude? How might this gratitude manifest in envy of us? Dependency upon us? Are we positioned as the saviors? Does our gratitude (or theirs) foster a continuing sense of superiority on our part or in their view?

Our service often has unintended consequences.

Are such feelings signs of mutual *dis*empowerment? If we leave students and community members with feelings such as these, are we perpetuating traditional power relations

Published by e-Publications@Marquette, 2007

between the global north and south? Or, do these feelings merely reflect the first stages of transformation, those related to the sensory and emotional overload so common in ISL, and perhaps an awakening?

Will we adopt an attitude of advocacy when we return?

It is common for students to return from an ISL experience feeling gratitude for what we have with an increased awareness of our privileges as U.S. citizens; certainly, this is one of our objectives for them. But what if gratitude were supplemented with a *critique* of what we have and of the global relations that support our lifestyles? What if we respond with empathy *and* a growing consciousness of historical and contemporary global relations?

If we foster a sense of responsibility *to* (rather than guilt *about* or responsibility *for*) our partners in the developing world, we may be more likely to develop an advocacy role upon our return, rather than holding the experience as merely a part of our education, albeit a cherished and important part. If we respond with hope and action rather than despair or self-satisfaction, we can turn our experiences into capacity. What if we take that empowerment home and reflect, reassess, grow, and advocate? It seems like these outcomes can begin to look like transformation.

Similarly, if in addition to the project's outcomes, community members were able to improve their communication and management skills, as well as gain useful construction, health care, and other skills valuable in other contexts, to respond to problems they identify, then we are seeing evidence of Paolo Freire's *capacitazaçao*. If they sustain the project and build on it with their own initiative, then we can say it is empowering. And if they feel supported, renewed, hopeful, more capable, we might indeed argue that they, too, have been transformed. These, in fact, are all signs of *mutual* empowerment transformation and should be our goal in international service learning.

If there is one overarching—and very hard—question here, it is as follows: Do our relationships with institutions, communities, and people in global education and service-learning partnerships *reproduce* or *disrupt* historical and inequitable power relationships between rich/poor, 1st world/3rd world, urban/rural, educated/not formally educated, etc.? In our answers to this question, we need to consider not only our educational objectives, learning outcomes for our students and the achievement of our universities' missions, but also the empowerment of *all* participants with the knowledge, skills, motivation, empathy, and passion for justice necessary to transform ourselves and our world.

We must be able to persuasively argue and concretely demonstrate that our programs, though imperfect and ever evolving, are facilitating the co-creation of a more just and equitable world system. To paraphrase Robert Bellah, if our programs are not building solidarity and justice in a globalized world, what good will they do? ■

Table One: Focus Group Reflections on Transformation

Changed from What	to	What?
Fear of 'other'	→	Development of respect, trust
Low global awareness	→	Higher global awareness
Vague sense of disconnection	→	Feeling of connection to global others
Non-emotional, even numbed, routine life	→	Emotional presence, emotional intensity
Vague stereotypes about the other	→	Sense of differences/common humanity
Romantic ideas of village life/people	→	More realistic understanding
Overwhelmed	→	Engaged
Happiness=lifestyle	→	Happiness in community
Charity/"helping'	→	Service/mutual liberation
Feeling entitled	→	Feeling grateful *and* responsible
Short-term goals (e.g., building houses)	→	Longer-term structural change
Wanting to help materially	→	Wanting to build relationships
Bystanders	→	Participants, perhaps activists